

I Kings 19.1-15a, Luke 8.26-39

Our Old Testament reading this morning finds the prophet Elijah in something of a mid-life crisis. It's about 850 BC – the reign of King Ahab – and Elijah comes from Gilead, on the east side of the river Jordan, in Israel, where he is a very successful prophet. The stories about him are some of the most memorable in the Old Testament. Elijah telling King Ahab there will be no rain on Israel until he says so, because Israel has disobeyed God. Elijah going into the desert to pray, and being fed by ravens. Elijah visiting a widow in Sidon, and raising her son from the dead. Elijah staging a competition between himself and the prophets of the god Baal, in which each side set up an altar with a sacrifice and a fire on it, and called on their own god to light the fire. The prophets of Baal get nothing, but when Elijah throws water all over his fire and then calls on God to light it, it blazes up and everything is consumed.

You can't do that kind of thing without making enemies, and when today's story begins, Elijah has made the most formidable enemy in Israel, Queen Jezebel. Afraid for his life, he retreats into the desert and sits under a solitary tree, deeply depressed. 'O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.'

He's too low to look after himself, so God sends an angel with bread and water. The food makes him strong enough to walk, for 40 days and nights, deep into the desert, to Mount Horeb. There he hears a voice asking what is the matter, and he explains that he's given his life to God, and done everything he can, and now everyone wants to kill him. He's ready to give up. But the voice tells him to go and stand out on the mountainside, because the Lord is about to pass by.

'And there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces... but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and stood at the entrance to the cave. Then came a voice that said, "What are you doing here, Elijah? ... Go, return on your way."'

The picture of Elijah is a classic picture of an achiever: someone who is used to success. He was a man of deep faith, but he also expected to get a lot done. And he can't really handle failure. He doesn't know what to do: 'I have been very zealous for the Lord... and the Israelites are trying to kill me.'

Even as he says that, though he doesn't know it, Elijah's cure has already begun. What saves him is his instinct, in trouble, to go back to God. To abandon the

world where he's a controversial celebrity; to let all its noise fall away into silence; to lay his exhaustion and disappointment at God's feet, and wait.

It's no accident that this is one of the most memorable stories in the Bible. All of us have times when everything is too much – we're too busy, or in trouble; there are too many demands on us, too much noise. The only answer is to go back to our own desert – the place where we can put down our burdens and do nothing but wait, and let stillness soak into our bones, and hope eventually to hear the voice of God.

Jesus did it often. In his high-profile, controversial years of teaching, he often retreated into the desert to pray. And Jesus is like Elijah in many ways – so much so that when he started preaching, people thought he might be Elijah come back to save Israel again. And like Elijah, every time Jesus goes into the desert, God sends him back into the world. Because God allows Elijah his respite, but the desert isn't his home; he has a mission to Israel. But God hears Elijah's cry that he can't bear his burden alone, and the first person he meets when he comes out of the desert, is Elisha, who asks to become his follower, and will eventually become his successor, and the next great prophet of Israel. Although his vocation is a hard one, God doesn't leave Elijah to bear it alone.

Our gospel reading shows us a very different person waiting for God. Gerasa (or Gadara) is at the northern tip of Gilead – Elijah's country – and on the desert hills outside the town lives a man who is possessed by demons. He used to be kept in chains but he would snap them and run away. Now he squats in the graveyard. His clothes have long since fallen apart and no-one has cared or dared to give him any more. We can imagine how he must have looked – filthy, emaciated, straggling hair and beard, shouting out uncontrollably. Frightening to children. Despised and rejected by everybody. (It does make one wonder where he came from. Maybe he was another high achiever – a family man – a clever student – a rising civil servant – who couldn't cope with the pressure of it all.)

To him, as to Elijah, comes the Lord – this time in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus sails over the sea of Galilee, walks up the hill from the shore, and there's the man. Jesus asks his name, and the demons inside the man answer, just as Elijah's inner demons had answered God. And like Elijah, Jesus gives the man back his peace. He chases the demons out of him, and gives him clothes to put on.

The man, miraculously healed, wants to stay with Jesus forever, just as Elijah wanted to stay in the desert. But Jesus has other ideas: 'Go back your home, and declare how much God has done for you.' This is a very unusual end to a healing miracle. Often, Jesus tells the healed person not to tell anyone. But to this man, he

gives a mission, and not an easy one, to go home after years of being ostracized, and preach the word of God. But he does it, and the last we hear of him, he is proclaiming throughout the city how much Jesus has done for him.

The strange similarities between Elijah and the Gerasene man remind us that it is in times of the deepest distress that we are often most open to meeting God. And there are hidden Elijahs in all sorts of people. These stories show us the compassion of God, who doesn't give us a difficult mission without at least someone to share it with, and something to wear. But they also remind us, that a difficult mission may be what we have - like Jesus himself, who was often exhausted and discouraged, and had to pray for strength to carry on.

What Elijah, and Jesus, and the Gerasene man all have - the thing that makes their mission possible - is the most important part of faith. The willingness to stop, and wait, and listen for God. To let ourselves be touched by God. And then, to let ourselves be sent.

Amen
(Littlemore)